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The stranded cinderella and the wandering rascal. Two narratives of female housing exclusion

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the life stories of two young Polish women who have faced severe marginalization and homelessness. The main aim of this article is to investigate how the notions of (in)visibility and (im)mobility are shaping participants' everyday lives and life stories they tell. Using concepts drawn from social sciences, as well as cultural and literary studies, this article attempts to reconstruct the narrative frameworks of their life stories. Marzena's story is a non-linear collection of adventures reminiscent of a picaresque novel, but with fractured agency, which leaves her powerless and restlessly moving around the city. Angelika, on the other hand, is trapped in a two-room dilapidated house with no running water, located in a rural part of Poland. Her narrative resembles a telenovela with melodramatic plot twists, romance and hard-to-believe revelations about the narrator's true self; further, it is a purposeful journey in search for happiness and fortune. Surprisingly, Marzena's mobility makes it unlikely for her to overcome homelessness, while the stranded Angelika finds the resilience necessary to improve her life. The proposed analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of women's experiences of homelessness and demonstrates the need to regard housing exclusion also as a biographical process.

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the invisibility of women's homelessness (Baptista 2010; Bretherton 2017). Feminist geographers also distinguish between "visible" homelessness (women sleeping rough and living in shelters) (May et al., 2007) from "invisible," the latter concerning women who are not accounted for in homelessness statistics and policies (Pleace 2016). Invisible homelessness is experienced by individual women and entire households, who "sofa-surf" or are forced to deal with overcrowding, inadequate housing, insecure tenures, and violence. As a living situation, homelessness is far from static. People facing extreme marginalization are frequently also highly mobile, moving between localities, e.g. shelters, friends' houses, and vacant buildings (Kaufman 2020). Recently, women's homelessness is increasingly often explored with the help of biographical methods (Hellegers 2011; Mayock et al., 2015). However, much of the research has so far relied on interviews as a source of information about the lives of participants. Although these studies have provided important data on women's homelessness pathways and use of services, there are virtually no studies that explore multiple dimensions of invisibility and mobility, and how they are reflected in these narratives.

In this paper, we attempt to bridge that gap, at least partially, by examining the life stories of two women who participated in a study about the homelessness of women in Poland. The main aim of this article is to investigate how the intersections of homelessness, gender, motherhood, lack of family support etc. shape the participants' lives, biographies, and self-images. We decode the cultural figures and tropes that the participants used while telling their stories. Furthermore, the study intends to show how the notions of visibility and invisibility, as well as mobility and immobility, are unexpectedly entangled in the lives and life stories of our informants. By treating narratives as social constructions that draw from psychology, literature and popular culture, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of women's experiences of homelessness.

Homelessness or housing exclusion (used interchangeably here) has a paradoxical relationship with mobility (Kaufman 2020). Physical displacement reproduces inequalities; however, housing instability simultaneously produces the kind of mobility that is related to services and personal networks as well as driven by the criminalization of living in public space, and many more factors (Kaufman 2020). The notion of (im)mobility is also strongly coupled with (in)visibility. It is possible to distinguish several overlapping aspects of women's experience of

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homelessness, which contribute to their (in)visibility: presence "on the streets," access to and use of services, personal safety, family relations, mothering, and the spatial context. The urban dimension and women's strategies of avoiding both public spaces and shelters have been studied extensively (cf. Casey et al., 2008). There has been little investigation of gender and homelessness in rural areas (Whizman 2006 being a notable exception). Rural areas are often idealized as boasting closely-knit communities that would not allow for homelessness (Whizman 2006) and regarded as 'purified space', where homelessness is especially 'out of place' (Cloke et al., 2000). Additionally, given that the countryside is often more conservative with regard to gender roles, the rural context may prompt people, especially women, to conceal their situation. Studies indicate that taking care of a child protects women from living in the streets, but policies rarely secure long-term solutions. Furthermore, homelessness radically limits one's ability to take care of children and many women have their offspring taken away from them. As a result, they cease to be treated as mothers and their access to support is severely limited (van den Dries et al., 2016). In both cases, mothers and their children may disappear from the homeless category. Finally, in social sciences, where researchers seek to establish measurable patterns and similarities, particular stories are not sufficiently explored, which contributes to the invisibility of individual narratives.

2. The social context of developing biographical narratives

As mentioned previously, existing research on women's homelessness does recognize the role of biographical methods (Hellegers 2011; Mayock et al., 2015). Biographical interviews are mainly used to reconstruct "housing biographies," and reflect on the use of the social support system, voluntary organizations, or the safety net of the local community. However, homelessness and precariousness, understood as a combination of instability and vulnerability (Butler 2009), also impact the construction of life stories. Strategies of developing self-narratives have cultural foundations: individuals learn about various available narratives by participating in culture, listening to other people's stories, attending therapy sessions, and confessing. Life stories are "highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences" (Bruner 2004: 694). "Treating narratives as constructions," Langley observes, "does not deny the material realities of women's experiences but draws attention to how their experiences are interpreted and understood through socially situated narratives" (Langley 2017: 99).

This article is indebted to biographical scholarship in social sciences (e.g. Riemann and Schütze 1991). However, we have also been inspired by feminist methodology (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984), which assumes that displaying flexibility in the use of protocols and following the interviewee can help to prevent researchers from establishing a hierarchical, potentially abusive relationship with the participant. Both Marzena and Angelika willingly talked to us about their lives. We tried to avoid interrupting them and to encourage constructing narratives about their lives by listening attentively and asking supplementary questions. Acknowledging the complexity of our interviewees' experiences and the context of research (we learned their stories throughout several meetings), we have tried to examine how participants use language to turn events into anecdotes, how they construct the plot, and how characters develop in the course of the story (Bruner 2004).

The following analyses of life stories and their narrativization by study participants draw on categories derived from cultural studies of literary and media genres. Additionally, television and popular literature convey values that are crucial in a given culture, making the availability of narratives depend on one's social position (Somers 1994) and internalized cultural patterns. Therefore, the modes of narrating as well as adapting (or failing to adapt) existing narrative patterns can show how people experience their situation.

3. The polish context

Little is known about women's homelessness in Poland. We have analysed the existing body of literature elsewhere (Mostowska and Dębska 2020a). Gender, space, and the notion of invisibility are rarely problematized in these studies. At the national level, collecting data on homelessness is limited to a biannual one-night count that takes into account only its "visible" forms: living in public spaces and unconventional constructions, shelters, and other facilities of temporary collective accommodation. Housing situations that are elsewhere often associated with women's coping strategies (such as living with family or friends) or gender-specific situations (such as living under the threat of violence) are not reported. In the latest count, conducted in February 2019, out of more than 30 000 people experiencing homelessness that night, 14.6% were women (MRPiPS 2019). The robustness of the ministerial count, however, has been widely disputed (Mostowska 2020). Quantitative data does not allow us to draw any conclusions regarding the extent or character of women's housing exclusion in Poland. Women's experiences and narratives are also shaped by cultural stereotypes. The Catholic faith is ingrained in the dominant Polish motherhood model, the Polish Mother, who sacrifices herself for her children and the nation. Post-1990, in the neo-liberal setting, this model evolved into the "supermama" figure, a nurturing mother, who is also pursuing a professional career (Packalén 2004). This motherhood ideal, however, does not unconditionally apply to poor mothers, for instance, those living in Catholic institutions (Mostowska and Dębska 2020b).

4. Characterization of the study material

This article analyses the life stories of two women who have experienced housing exclusion. The study material was obtained as part of a research project realized in the years 2017–2019 and devoted to the homelessness of women in Poland. Forty four interviews with women who experienced homelessness were conducted. The two case studies are associated with some of the most divergent socio-spatial contexts in Poland: (1) a metropolitan area with a dense network of support organizations, (2) a rural and mountainous region with some of the poorest and most traditional communities in the country (Mostowska and Dębska 2020b). Our interviewees have spent their whole lives in the respective contexts. Marzena responded to an advertisement about the study, posted in a crisis centre. She was thirty-seven at the time. A total of four interviews were held with her in different places in the city over the course of one and a half years. Angelika was thirty during the first interview. A total of three interviews were held with her, all of them in different locations. She has not invited us to her home and preferred meeting in public places. Contact with her continued over e-mail and phone for almost two years. Not all interviews were recorded, but detailed notes would be taken immediately after every interview and compared later.

Ethical aspects of conducting research were accepted by the funding institution during the process of application. Both women were informed about the aim of our research as well as assured of anonymity and confidentiality of all data. They gave their verbal informed consent to participate in the study, and voluntarily participated in subsequent meetings. Necessary precautions were taken to keep the data secure and to ensure the anonymity of the women. We remained aware of our dominant position during the research (Tang 2002). We would not only listen to stories but also act as "coaxers" (Plummer 1995) who seduce stories out of people. However, neither of the two women had to be persuaded to talk – both were loquacious and eager to share. Angelika and Marzena are roughly the same age as we are. We were both aware of our privileged position in comparison with theirs, both in economic and social terms. In particular, Angelika would ask questions of her own, sometimes soliciting opinions about the events she would describe (Oakley 1981). In the case of Marzena, who was offered some sort of material support each time, the situation of our dominance was far

clearer (Tang 2002). Angelika not only refused the humble remuneration that would be offered to every interviewee but also brought gifts of her own to one of the meetings. Our willingness to reward the interviewees for their contribution to our research had both an ethical and a practical aim: on the one hand, we received remuneration for conducting research; on the other hand, however, financial incentives were meant to help us maintain long-lasting relations with the research participants. In both cases, all contact stopped unexpectedly.

5. Methods of analysis

Transcribing recorded interviews verbatim and gathering field notes from all meetings and correspondence followed with the multi-stage coding of the two cases, each of us concentrating on one participant. The two cases analysed here stand out against the rest of the material; therefore, we decided to apply a methodology that seemed best suited to grasp their specificity. The aim was to identify elements of discourses used by the study participants, then focusing on any apparent gaps and things left unsaid. A thorough analysis of the text has also allowed us to pinpoint recognizable literary genres and narratives structured around a hero's journey, development, and redemption. Secondly, the material was analysed in terms of structure, chronology, and storyline, taking into account aspects such as the sequence of events, time references, causal links, explanations, and justifications. Further, consideration was given to the presence of other characters and their significance in the story. Finally, attention was devoted to the use of language: vocabulary, repeated or emphasized words and phrases, metaphors, and other figures of speech, as well as the use of passive and active voice.

In the case of each participant, we start with a general description of life events and the current situation; then we proceed to reconstruct their narratives on the basis of identified themes and structures. In Marzena's case, it is a picaresque novel and the figure of the trickster, while in Angelika's – the structure of telenovela and the fairy tale about Cinderella.

6. Marzena

Marzena lives in a large Polish city. She has been experiencing homelessness for around twenty years, moving from one institution to another or living in cheap rooms for rent, vacant buildings, or on the streets. Marzena would take up different jobs, often undocumented ones, also as a sex worker. Just before the first interview, she decided to move out of the vacant building where she lived with her partner, and find a better place, mainly because she was pregnant.

6.1. Fragmentation of the narrative

Marzena's story is characterized by the multiplication of vulnerabilities that recur in studies on chronic homelessness, including that of women (Hellegers 2011; Pleace et al., 2016). She would recount the many years of violence experienced from her relatives and partner as well as in the streets, difficulties with finding and keeping odd jobs, sex work, addiction to alcohol, and drug use. Her life situation and place of residence would change almost weekly as she moved between rented rooms, night shelters, vacant buildings, refuges, crisis centres, and single mothers' homes. As in many metropolitan areas across Europe, Marzena's home city cannot meet the demand for beds in shelters; additionally, there is no system coordinating information about their availability in different organizations, which means that people are often forced to enquire on their own.

Marzena barely mentions her parents and her narrative does not coherently account for her childhood and youth. Marzena has had no contact with her parents or her brother for years. "My mother," she says, "buried me alive, as it were." Her parents divorced when she was a teenager. Her father was addicted to alcohol and Marzena would flee from him to her mother or "into the streets."

Marzena's narrative lacks any clear beginning and anything suggestive of an archetypal journey of a hero (Campbell 1973); it rather displays features of the picaresque novel. Originating in the sixteenth century in Spain yet remaining highly influential, this genre is characterized by first-person narration centred around a wandering, lower-class protagonist. Marzena's autobiography is ironic and non-linear, composed of mundane events, anecdotes, and dialogues. In this anthology of adventures, she acts as a trickster or anti-heroine characterized by compulsive restlessness, although she would also seek community and love (Blackburn 1979). Just like in the picaresque, Marzena is constantly physically endangered and must be wary of who she can trust.

Moreover, her actions oppose or even violate social and legal norms, which is also typical of trickster figures in mythology and popular culture. The social order rarely allowed her to fulfil her needs; therefore, she takes advantage of situations where she can bend the rules without being sanctioned. She describes with laughter that she was once advised by a policeman on how she cannot be punished for shoplifting products worth less than 25 PLN since the Polish law treats such cases as a misdemeanour and not a felony:

You come [to a store] with an empty bag, you leave with a full one, the guard will tell you "go." I can always take cold cuts worth up to 20 PLN and they are mine. [laughs] I laugh because I've been going there for 5 years now and it always works.

Lack of a stable place of her own and any close people around her has uprooted Marzena from the social world, which is reflected in her story, where events unfold in many locations at the same time, while many of the vague characters (partner, colleague, child, parents) are characterized in contradictory terms. Marzena often uses direct speech, recalling sayings and recreating dialogues, which makes characters and places interchangeable as the time frame becomes irrelevant. Details often acquire great importance, actually propelling the story in which Marzena has little control over her life. Various good and bad things simply *happen to her*.

Marzena talks about her receiving support as if it happened by chance, thanks to somebody's kindliness or her cunning and sense of humour. She can find help, but this does not enable her to break away from homelessness. Marzena often depends on the sympathetic response of an official or the centre's director. Her history illustrates the revolving door theory: she would only stay for a limited amount of time in any given institution or would be expelled after violating regulations. Just like in the adventures of an anti-hero, parts of her narrative reveal the inefficiency of the social order, specifically the social support system.

Marzena's story often revolves around purely physical survival and extreme vulnerability. She is excluded from various support programmes without any consequences suffered by institutions responsible for these decisions. She chooses to change her place of residence only as a last resort when her life is physically endangered. For example, when she was pregnant she opted to move from the vacant building to a crisis centre, leaving her partner behind:

> The fact that my boyfriend lives in worse conditions than me hurts me; I do his laundry here […] Especially because it's cold there, the boys made a hearth out of a bathroom sink, they chop wood and burn it because some bookshelves were left there.

Marzena gets by at the basic level of survival thanks to the "good people" she meets on her way, and sometimes thanks to her "street smarts." She knows the topography of the city and the suburbs, night shelters, soup kitchens. She develops relations with other marginalized persons, i.e. homeless, undocumented migrants, or sex workers. She knows everybody and everybody knows her, which is characteristic of many trickster figures in European culture, who are associated with trade or act as messengers. The dialectics of visibility and invisibility is clearly visible in Marzena's social life. On the one hand, her homelessness is "visible" because she is a regular at support services and lives in

public spaces or vacant buildings; on the other hand, however, she stays invisible, on the margins of the neoliberal society, where recognition of individuals depends on their productivity and ability to consume.

6.2. Female rascal

Despite sharing much with the picaresque novel, Marzena's narrative also features many events that do not fit this model, especially ones related to womanhood. In the picaresque, a protagonist is typically a man who finds the feminine threatening or even morally repugnant (Cruz 2010). These narratives often feature misogynistic overtones, portraying women as sexually and materially insatiable, relying on their looks to cope and succeed. Nevertheless, the pícaro has a female counterpart – a wandering female swindler who has many romantic affairs and several children with different men. Still, Marzena's narrative does not really represent the female picaresque because she never uses her gender to achieve goals, gain the upper hand, or deceive others. She rarely emphasises her femininity either in her narrative or in the way she carries herself. Despite Marzena's androgynous look, her story is driven by events crucially related to gender. She would complain about how hard it is for a pregnant woman to find a job, rent a flat when caring for an infant, or seek a place in a shelter. She also experienced violence, primarily from men.

Marzena's humiliation is characteristic for a world where women's delinquency is closely associated with sexual decadence, while all non-normative forms of behaviour on the part of women, especially criminal ones, are linked with promiscuity. The subject of sexual behaviour, especially alleged infidelity, recurs in Marzena's story. Unfairly accused of sexual contacts with a fellow resident, Marzena was expelled from a night shelter:

> My room was locked for the night […] so I went to sleep at my colleague's […]. I was quite far along in my pregnancy and it was winter, minus fifteen outside. In the middle of the night, at 2 am, the director entered, saying "you trash." […]. So they kicked me out, eight months pregnant, with minus fifteen outside, calling me trash.

Since the 1970s gender-based violence, but also sexuality, have been one of the key axes organizing personal narratives (Plummer 1995; Woodiwiss 2017). Non-heteronormativity or traumatic experiences of abuse inform narrative frameworks of coming out, recovery tales, suffering, and survival stories based on the archetype of a journey, where the personal, the secret, and the embarrassing becomes public and political, turning into a source of strength and pride (Plummer 1995). However, Marzena's experiences of domestic violence and sexual abuse do not belong in the past – they return again and again, making it impossible to transform them into a positive component of identity, bring coherence to her story, and develop a self-image based on strength and pride. They are certainly not liberating, and preclude any "journey" in search of a "better version of herself."

It seems that Marzena is struggling to include her experiences as a mother into the narrative and to convey her experiences to others. As other characters in her stories, children appear almost always without names. Time references are obscured and it is often impossible to tell, which child she is talking about. The fire that was caused by a deficient stove in a place she was renting with her partner and a small child becomes a pivotal event in several anecdotes. While for the services this proves that Marzena is unfit to care for a child, she finds this judgment unfair.

> And only because of this stupid fire the request was sent from here [crisis centre] that I can't manage with a child […] I said, I made a mistake, all right, okay, it happened that I had quite a few of those kids, but it's not a reason to treat me like a person who, I don't know, cannot be a parent. Because I did raise one child until it was one year old, and another is three, and I raised it too, others are twelve, thirteen, so I did cope somehow with these children.

Marzena does not meet the criteria of a "good mother." In her story, as with other events in her life, Marzena's relations with her children would be shaped by outside forces. She would wrongly be labelled as promiscuous and irresponsible that in effect would not allow her to break free from the vicious circle of crisis institutions and her children being taken away by public services.

6.3. A narrative of fracture

Unlike in the case of the female pícaro, Marzena's womanhood does not give her the upper hand but is rather a source of trouble. Also, Marzena is not always courageous, cunning, and able to "get out of trouble." Instead, she is getting *into* trouble because of others: being caught stealing, drinking alcohol in the shelter, or staying in someone else's room in a crisis centre: "that girl talked me into this," "I was conned into this when they brought drugs to the flat." Marzena often suffers consequences for the misdeeds of her light-hearted friends, but she bears no grudge. She does not rely on her wits and luck to avoid consequences or punishment. On the contrary, she would be arrested, receive fines, have a criminal case in court, become expelled from the shelter, or have her child taken away.

Lack of agency manifests in language as well. In Marzena's narrative things happen without her active participation. In terms of language, this is recognizable in the use of passive voice, making her an object rather than a subject:

> I was forced out on the street, living in allotments or vacant buildings, and I got pregnant again, and then I ended up in the night shelter […] they were supposed to secure a place for me in a shelter, but the director did nothing to help me. After two nights, I was left on the street with my bag and things.

Lack of control over one's life and suffering consequences without being actually guilty makes Marzena's narrative different from that of a witty trickster. Marzena is rather helpless in relation to the system, relying on the sympathetic response of officials. In her story, her wit does not lay bare the institutional hypocrisy, as in the picaresque; rather, institutional inefficiency and unfairness are illustrated with situations when she is harmed. Embittered and hurt after being expelled from AA therapy, Marzena would recall an acquaintance from a single mothers' home who also drank alcohol when pregnant but faced no repercussions.

Lockwood (2017) notes that even in dire conditions women use narrative forms available to them through culture to adapt stories that relate their experiences to socially accepted patterns. Marzena's story could reflect her fragmented life "in the streets," or show her attempts to establish an interpretive community of support by drawing the attention of listeners who understand this type of storytelling. Cultural codes can sometimes break under the weight of experience. When dominant narratives are no longer capable of accounting for individual trauma, it is possible to observe the emergence of "narratives of fracture." Lockwood sees this narrative mode as a strategy of separating storytelling from experience, which resists being organized linearly. In such cases, one may construct chaotic stories that undermine the adequacy of existing narrative forms. Narratives of fracture only appear to grant agency to the narrator. In reality, they are developed from the position of subordination and helplessness, their goal being to "make sense of and positively frame the limitations of the situation" (Lockwood 2017: 144). Therefore, Marzena narrates her life story in a way that is amusing, dazzling with multiple adventures, and focusing on action rather than reflection. In this way, she would conceal her limited ability to decide about herself. Marzena's narrative has no beginning or end, reflecting her constant movement around the city in search of means to survive.

7. Angelika

Angelika has lived her entire life in the same house in one of the

poorest and least urbanized regions of Poland. During her childhood, she lived there with her grandparents and mother suffering from schizophrenia, and now she shares the place with her mother and her teenage daughter. The two-room house is damp, heated with an electric stove, and has no running water or sewage system. Throughout her life, Angelika has suffered from housing exclusion as her home has never met any technical or health-related standards. It has always been overcrowded. In her childhood, Angelika would experience violence from her grandparents and mother, and later from her partner. Currently, she takes care of her daughter and mother, at the same time working full time as a sales representative. Her financial situation is additionally complicated by being in severe debt due to her mother's illness, dealing with her own health problems, and having been initially employed on the basis of a fee-for-task agreement, and lacking access to proper information about premiums and taxes.

7.1. Telenovela

Angelika's life story follows the model of a telenovela, in which substantial inequality is glaring and durable to such an extent that it seems insurmountable save for supernatural intervention, e.g. love at first sight between a prince and a beggar girl. One hallmark of such narratives is the clear division of the spheres in which the protagonist is active. In the Cinderella story – prototypical for the telenovela – the heroine's job is cleaning, as a result of which she has contact with waste or soot, which dirties her apron. However, during the ball in a castle, she makes a dazzling entrance and even her stepsisters cannot recognize her (Bettelheim 2010). Angelika presented herself in these categories; it was also the way she was introduced by the specialist who contacted us. Angelika made repeated reservations that she knows her story "is difficult to believe for anyone looking at her." Paradoxically then, its radical improbability would confirm its truthfulness:

Most people who meet me simply refuse to believe my story, but I just tell them: at some point in my life I made mistakes, somewhere along the way I lacked love.

Angelika's external appearance hides the fact that her housing situation can be classified as homelessness. As a tall blonde of average built, Angelika's looks match today's ideal of beauty. Well-groomed and carefully dressed, she often finds it difficult to convince officials about her difficult housing situation. Her conforming to gender standards makes her unreliable in the eyes of those who regulate access to social support, and therefore her housing problem remains invisible. Although the draughty windows were changed several months after the first interview, the modest renovation both cheered Angelika up and sadly reminded her that she is not likely to move. At work, in professional settings, she is visible as a "normal" citizen, an individual able to perform her professional duties, while at the same time falling into the category of "invisible" homeless women. Everyday mobility and working outside of the village she lives in lets her hide the fact that she lives in dire conditions that do not meet the basic standard.

One of the characteristic themes in Latin American telenovelas and similar formats is the figure of a young, heterosexual, lower-class woman who lives in difficult conditions but is beautiful and good-hearted, although she remains unappreciated or perhaps even her true identity is hidden until the very end. This motif is culturally widespread and appears in fairy tales like Cinderella, confirming its vital role in shaping notions of radical, positive change in life. Both Cinderella and Angelika spent their childhood in poverty. Angelika's grandparents had some land, but their income was modest. Her mother could not work due to schizophrenia, and her father shared only a little money to support his child.

The social aversion that Angelika experienced in her childhood and as a teenager was connected with treating single women as sexually suspicious and promiscuous. Her mother bore a child out of wedlock and had informal intimate contacts, against conventional morality. The neighbours' criticism of her mother's intimate life would overlap with the stigmatization of schizophrenia. Living in the countryside, in a small community, Angelika could not escape the stigma her mother's illness was associated with. Thus, the fact that her mother was shunned affected how Angelika was regarded by people around her:

> Our neighbours … were not inclined to help me, they would just talk about the "crazy mother" or "mother whore." And so on.

Additionally, when Angelika became pregnant at the age of sixteen, her stigmatization deepened. Not only is the label of a "bad mother" associated with neglecting the child's need but also with the way the baby was brought into the world (Donath 2017). Angelika recalled a meeting with nuns at the single mothers' home to whom she turned to for help; they criticized her and told her to pray:

> The nun took my hand, threw me in front of the altar, and said: "apologize to God for having a baby" […] I was asked by nuns if I really wanted to bring up the child myself because one signature would be enough and the baby would find [adoptive parents].

For a long time, child's father refused to participate in the upbringing of their daughter. Nonetheless, Angelika has put a lot of effort into meeting all her daughter's needs. She and the girl talk often and honestly. Angelika experiences her motherhood both as a challenge (due to economic and housing hardships) and as a pleasure, which reflects the complex experiences of motherhood (Rich 1986). Despite being stigmatized by social services and the local community as an inappropriate, teen mother, Angelika managed to create a satisfactory relationship with her daughter. During her childhood, however, Angelika felt rejected by her mother, who would not show her affection. She felt lonely and neglected, compensating this with dreams about an alternative family:

My mom would not hug me or tell me she loved me. Every time I would be hit with a cable or belt or whatever, in my face, I would sit on the stairs and say to myself that I am a foster child because it's impossible to have parents like this.

In her childish way Angelika cared for her appearance, foregrounding her femininity with self-made clothes and accessories:

> I kept doing this, making earrings from flowers and sticking them with plasticine […]. I would make my own dresses. Just keeping on doing something around myself.

This compulsion can be also read as a way of rejecting her harsh reality and attempting to change it. In a similar vein, Angelika would try to make the space around her more functional to introduce a little bit of comfort and privacy:

I tried to make a bed for myself behind the desk, sleeping on two or three quilts, but this would not work because we heated the entire house with one stove.

Refusal to accept the material reality of her family home manifests in many stories of upward mobility she related during interviews. The negation of reality at the affective level as well as attempts to improve it in the material dimension demonstrate the dire conditions in which Angelika grew up.

When Angelika was thirteen, her grandmother broke her leg and required assistance until her death, which became the duty of the granddaughter, who later also took care of the grandfather after his health deteriorated. Angelika tries to identify positive aspects of these difficult conditions, emphasizing that this taught her "real hard work and respect." Despite complaining about insufficient institutional help and social apathy, she would express her thankfulness for the lessons that these hardships entailed. Burdening Angelika with duties is characteristic of the process termed "parentification," in which children overtake adult responsibilities, often ones exceeding their capabilities. Cinderella is a striking example of this.

Angelika did not finish high school. She worked in retail, applying several times for work in the company where she is currently employed. At first, she was rejected on the grounds of her education, but her

determination convinced the director to hire her as a sales representative. She had good results and was praised for her work, but conflict with the new director made her aware of the fragility of her professional situation. Angelika advanced not on the basis of her educational achievements, but thank to her personal merits, recognized during recruitment. The precarity of employment can actually affect people who hold a work contract and enjoy related benefits, but who cannot change their job due to lack of competences demanded on the market. The contract protects the employee only while it lasts, but its termination could be tragic, unlike in the case of people recruited conventionally.

7.2. Dreaming of a happy ending

Angelika's story features elements characteristic for dreams about a good and safe life cherished by the Polish middle class: having one's own place and a stable partner, being able to keep oneself and one's family safe (e.g. through access to healthcare), and relying on the private sector because public services are inaccessible and ineffective:

I believe that I will build a beautiful house with a separate entrance for her [mother] so that she can simply be with her grandchildren, with my husband, with me, enjoying her life; that I will find a private clinic, not a hospital, where I can pay, say a thousand euro so that they can treat her without tying her down.

In her narrative, Angelika refers to Hellinger's constellation therapy she attended and religious discourse, which intertwine and supplement each other. Hellinger's constellations, although rejected by many practitioners as a form of therapy, have allowed Angelika to explain for herself the dependencies between various events in her life. For example, she used to pilfer money from her grandparents to buy knick-knacks or cosmetics. She realized that she did so to reward herself and stave off separation anxiety disorder. Today she is a sales representative at a cosmetics company and, in a way, likewise offers similar little pleasures to others.

Religion has allowed Angelika to lend meaning to her experiences. One example of this is her belief that things happen for a reason as if guided by some invisible hand. She associates positive changes in her life (e.g. meeting her extended family) with visits to sanctuaries and prayers. Both religion and the ideology of Hellinger's constellations acknowledge the activity of mediators between individuals and the knowledge concealed from them. Angelika speaks of her therapist as someone who "took me under her wings"; she also recalls a similar situation with a priest she talked to, who recognized she had a "big heart." Their role in Angelika's life, as she narrates it, is similar to that of the fairy godmother from the Cinderella story.

Angelika describes her daughter as wise and reflective beyond her age, often directly quoting her words. Angelika speaks of her as an "angel" in their home, who "protects" her and her mother. The girl assures her mother of her love, does not judge, and never wants more than she can have. In narrative terms, she performs the function of a confidante and a fairy godmother, supporting Angelika in crucial moments and reassuring her about her decisions and actions. Her daughter's maturity, understanding, and dedication encourage Angelika and her mother, but it remains an important question whether the girl's childhood and teenage years are not a repetition of what Angelika went through at the same age, which resulted in many problems she has endured during her life.

The theme of recognizing or failing to discern Angelika's virtues by other people demonstrates her struggle for a social identity under unstable conditions. Importantly, both Hellinger's approach and religiousness would bring to the foreground her characteristics without taking into account the structural conditions of her life. For this reason, it is difficult to indicate, basing on her story, how she could achieve her goals differently than by way of some miracle, as in fairy tales or telenovelas. Angelika met her own "fairy godmothers" – a practitioner of Hellinger's methodology, a crisis centre worker, her partner's parents, etc. – only as an adult, but she thrives as they recognize her multidimensionality.

8. Comparison and conclusions

The life stories of Angelika and Marzena demonstrate the intricacy of experiences among people facing housing exclusion. Although experiences of homelessness are tied, through biographical analysis, with processes of developing one's self-image and social relations, it seems crucial that homelessness is an instance of radical instability and vulnerability and not an element or foundation of individual identity. An identity-based account of such experiences causes the biographies of people suffering from these problems to be interpreted as if her entire biography predetermined her lack of access to spaces guaranteeing a sense of safety in both physical and legal sense, to privacy, or to means necessary to realize one's social needs.

In none of the stories motherhood on its own, let alone the Polish Mother figure, has become a narrative framework structuring the whole story. Both Marzena and Angelika have distanced themselves from the Catholic support organizations that failed to help them. Marzena's motherhood is largely invisible; Angelika's – did not work in her favour either with respect to priority treatment by public services. Motherhood experiences of women who are homeless are diverse, and a simplified notion that having children works to their advantage allowing mothers to escape physical homelessness (van den Dries et al., 2016) is not supported here. Neither Marzena nor Angelika was perceived or treated as more deserving due to having children.

The narratives of the two women disclose two different faces of housing exclusion – Angelika's being "stationary" and provincial, while Marzena's – "mobile" and urban. Marzena is visible through her homelessness, which makes her "invisible" to most of the society. Angelika's homelessness remains "invisible" even to the support system. She appears to be stranded in substandard housing conditions in a small, remote town. However, thanks to her company car she can cover relatively large distances. Marzena, on the other hand, moves between various institutions, including religious ones and NGOs, living in rented flats or vacant buildings. The non-linear character of her story reflects her unstable situation, without conforming to any "feminine" or "romantic" narrative frame. She takes the role of a trickster, but one whose agency is very limited. Angelika's isolation, from which there currently seems to be no escape, and Marzena's spatial mobility seem to work the wrong way round if one scrutinizes the potential of the two women to break away from housing exclusion. Marzena's mobility seems to translate into her being trapped in homelessness, while Angelika's attachment to her place of residence allows her to "develop" in the professional, emotional, and social spheres.

The similarity of certain elements in the biographies of the two women – being mothers, having primary education, as well as regarding sexuality and emotionality as vital components of their life and self-image – makes the differences between them even more prominent. Marzena's social position is radically lower in comparison to that of her parents, while Angelika, despite suffering various defeats, keeps trying to create for herself and her daughter such conditions that would facilitate increasing social mobility and coping with housing exclusion. In this respect, Angelika's narrative corresponds to the idea of being "the architect of one's own fortune," which is still clearly present in Polish discourse and revolves around the notion of responsibility for own fate. Marzena's more chaotic narrative loops around specific events or figures which casts doubt on the causal relations linking events as well as their chronology or future consequences. Although the lives of both women abound in difficult experiences, the way in which Angelika frames her story – emphasizing her agency, the importance of planning, outlook on the future, awareness of her achievements, all tinged with fantasy and unrealistic expectations – allows one to assume that she would have at her disposal the means necessary to set and pursue her life goals. Marzena, on the other hand, despite her use of humour and irony, has little

control over her life. In the interviews, she did not develop any comprehensive vision of the future, and the temporal horizon of her narrative was quite narrow.

The above analysis demonstrates the need for further reflection on homelessness and housing exclusion in processual and biographical perspectives, examining it not just as a situation that individuals find themselves in at a given moment. Commonly, examination of experiences of housing exclusion tends to focus on the living conditions; however, it is impossible to disregard how individuals interpret and narrate their life stories. The rationality displayed by study participants does not always fit common-sense notions about their needs and adequate means of taking action in such circumstances, making it difficult for them to find ways of narrating their lives using dominant discourses (Somers 1994: 630). Certainly, the widespread strategy of planning one's steps in advance does not work in the case of either woman, who has no family or material resources to fall back on when in crisis. The radical instability and vulnerability of their living conditions necessitate creative development of coping mechanisms, which are often provisional and tentative, based on fragmented knowledge about the possibilities open before individuals. The present study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of how narrating life stories may also reflect coping strategies and contribute to the debate on the two crucial notions for women's homelessness: (im)mobility and (in) visibility.

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